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Are Purgatory and Prayers for the Dead Biblical?

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Some Christian denominations believe in the existence of an intermediate state after physical death for expiratory purification, often called Purgatory. The Roman Catholic Church is probably one of the known denominations that firmly adheres to this doctrine. According to Catholic theology, Purgatory is a place or condition of temporal punishment where the souls of Christians [who are not entirely free from venial sins, or who have not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions] go after death, to be cleansed of sins that had not been fully satisfied during their life. Accordingly, Catholics further believe that prayers for the dead alleviate their suffering in Purgatory and hasten their passage through it. Unfortunately, the doctrine of Purgatory is completely unbiblical!

Apart from the fact that the word Purgatory or similar wording is nowhere found in the Bible, the concept of Purgatory contradicts what the Holy Scriptures teach us. The Bible teaches us that Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for all of our sins (Isaiah 53:5; Romans 5:8 ; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4). By saying that we must also suffer for our own sins, we are saying that Jesus' suffering was insufficient. To say that we must atone for our sins through purification in Purgatory is to deny the sufficiency of Jesus' atoning sacrifice (1 John 2:2). It is good to clarify that the doctrine of Purgatory, being based on a misunderstanding of the nature of Christ's sacrifice, fails to understand that Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice was absolutely and perfectly sufficient (Hebrews 7:27).

For believers, 2 Corinthians 5:6-8 is very clear that the after death is *"away from the body and at home with the Lord"*. In Jesus' own words, He promised to be with one of the two hanged criminals [who repented] in paradise, which was their next home (Luke 23:39–43). This could probably be a great opportunity for Jesus to talk about Purgatory if it exists. However, He did not say: "*I will be with you* after an extended time of misery and suffering or after having passed through the cleansing fire of Purgatory". In another story found in Luke 16:19-31, Lazarus was picked up to Abraham's side and Jesus also did not indicate that there was any time lapse between his death and his being picked up by the angels. The story overshadows two places, heaven and hell, and in both cases, there seems to be an immediate entrance after death.

Nowhere does the Bible indicate an intermediary place between heaven and hell or people who stand between the saved and the lost. Instead, reprimanded are people who are spiritually neither cold nor hot (Revelation 3:15). There is no pretence of being able to remedy their spiritual condition after death. The Bible makes it clear that people go either to hell or are immediately in the Lord's presence after death, fully cleansed, free from sin, glorified, perfected, and ultimately sanctified (Philippians 1:23 ; Revelation 6:9). The concept of being half-saved and being purified after death is totally not biblical.

So, what about praying for the dead and is it biblical?
No! The Bible teaches us that living believers can pray for their living fellow believers (James 5:16 ; Ephesians 6:18;). However, at the point of death, one's eternal destiny is confirmed, so our prayers have no bearing at that point.

The Bible teaches that the eternal state of humanity is determined by our actions during our life on earth (Ezekiel 18:20). The story of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar (Luke 16:19-31) provides us with a vivid illustration of this truth that the righteous go to heaven and the unrighteous goes to hell, eternally separated from God, that they remember their rejection of the gospel, that they are in torment, and that their condition cannot be remedied.

It's however unfortunate that the practice of praying for the dead is observed in certain areas of Christendom. While we sympathize with those who have lost close heirs, it is important to keep in mind that our prayers do not bring any change to a person's spiritual condition after death (Hebrews 9:27). The point is that we all live once, and we are responsible for how we live this one life. It is true that our choices can be influenced by others, but ultimately, we must be accountable for the choices we make. Once life is over, we have no more choice but to face judgement. In Romans 2:3-9, Paul makes it clear that the time to pray for people is while they are living, when it is still possible for their hearts, attitudes, and behavior to change.

In all, while we are still alive, now is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2) since there is no post-mortem plan of salvation. Death is final, and after that, no amount of prayer will enable a person to obtain the salvation he has rejected in his life. Every individual must be prepared to face inevitable death and the judgment that follows.

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David K (8 months ago)

Thank you for sharing this truth Sir. It is always best if Christian doctrine is rooted in the teachings of God's word. In our world today, many strange teachings have taken root - they have been taught and widely believed by many people yet without reference to the Bible.